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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 004602

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2017
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [FR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: ELSYEE TAKE ON LEBANON: THE INITIATIVE TO ELECT
SLEIMAN HAS ALREADY FAILED

REF: BEIRUT 1890 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt for reasons 1.4. (b), (d).

¶1. (C) French Presidency NEA adviser Boris Boillon told PolMinCouns and poloff November 29 that he is concerned that the March 14-backed initiative to elect LAF commander Michel Sleiman as president has already failed. He criticized the maladroit way he claimed March 14 had prematurely announced its backing for Sleiman, which gave Michel Aoun time before anything irreversible had been done in parliamentary terms to reach out to Hizballah and block Sleiman. According to Boillon, Hizballah has told Aoun that it will support him in his opposition. The GOF is trying now to determine whether Syria and Iran back Hizballah in this latest twist, one that not only complicates the election but also raises anew the possibility of violent clashes.

¶2. (C) Boillon said that the Elysee would hold a meeting on next steps later in the day to include Secretary General of the Presidency Claude Gueant, diplomatic adviser to President Sarkozy Jean-David Levitte, Boillon's counterpart at the MFA Christophe Bigot, and himself. The MFA was already preparing instructions for Beirut, Damascus, and Tehran. For Tehran, the aim would be to determine whether the Iranians were behind Hizballah's decision to back Aoun or might be used to persuade Hizballah to support Sleiman's election.

¶3. (C) With respect to Syria, Boillon indicated that the Elysee was trying to figure out Damascus, thinking; it regards what happens next as a definitive test that will go a long way to defining French/Syrian relations. He confirmed that he and Gueant had traveled last week to Damascus to try at the eleventh hour to get renewed Syrian assurances that Syria would allow the electoral process to play out peacefully. Gueant and Boillon also sought Syrian assurances Lebanese parliament speaker Berri would be authorized to agree on a name to put forward as president (Boillon did not indicate any negotiation/discussion of specific names). Boillon related that after that visit and two days before outgoing Lebanese President Lahud's term ended, Syrian President Asad had received Lahud, who had secretly traveled to Damascus to ask for instructions on what to do. According to Boillon, Asad told Lahud to leave Ba'bda Palace at the end of his term and not to take any special measures. The Syrians sought a follow-up meeting with the French and offered to send FM Mu'allim to Paris prior to Annapolis, but

the GOF had refused. Boillon gave no hint that any further high-level contacts were in the offing.

14. (C) French anger at Aoun was apparent as we spoke to Boillon. Sarkozy, according to Boillon, telephoned Aoun to ask that he not stand in the way of electing a president on time last week. Aoun listened and repeated the equivalent of &yes, sir8 several times but then announced his initiative to resolve the crisis, which had made an already difficult mission impossible. Boillon contended that Aoun was once more putting his personal ambition above all else and risking Lebanese peace and stability. In order to get rid of Aoun once and for all, France believed it vital that Sleiman receive a full, six-year term in office and not some shorter mandate that would give Aoun another chance to gain the presidency. The larger stakes in a new standoff over the election, however, were not entirely dictated by Aoun,s single-minded ambition but also by Hizballah,s and possibly Syria,s determination to irrevocably alter the Lebanese political landscape. The choice of the president mattered little compared to the subsequent choice of the cabinet, protecting Hizballah,s privileged position as an armed force, and amending the electoral law.

15. (C) Boillon was pessimistic about an immediate resolution of the standoff over the election, although he was aware that Saad Hariri was hoping to have the constitutional amendment and the vote completed by no later than Friday (November 30). The combined opposition of Hizballah and Aoun meant that a two-thirds majority in the parliament was impossible. Boillon reiterated France,s reservations about any outcome predicated on a majority vote short of two thirds. In his view, the best outcome following a simple majority election would be short-term calm but an eventual breakdown of order leading to a resumption of civil war. When we asked where Berri was in the current situation,

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Boillon answered that he largely seems to have withdrawn from center-stage, uncertain what his next move should be.

16. (C) This sobering meeting with Boillon came a day after a fortuitous meeting with French special envoy on Lebanon Jean-Claude Cousseran. In addition to noting that his job as special envoy will end with the eventual election of a president, Cousseran declared grimly that Syria had won. It would likely end up with a president with whom it could work and a confused and divided Lebanese polity that would not threaten its basic interests. In the end, the March 8 opposition held together in a way that March 14 never could. Syrian and Iranian support to March 8 ensured that and, in Cousseran,s view, was never matched by U.S. support for March 14. Iran, Hizballah, and Syria believe the wind is in their sails; they are confident, affirmed Cousseran, that their position -- in Lebanon and regionally -- will only strengthen in the coming months and years.

18. (C) Comment: We are not sure what the current state of play is in Beirut, but the French have, as expected, resigned themselves to an outcome they had long ago indicated they would accept to prevent a violent worst-case scenario from playing out. Boillon stressed at the outset of this latest meeting that Sleiman was &far from the best option,8 but he also emphasized the French view that electing Sleiman was the last option on the table. We detected no interest in using Aoun,s and Hizballah,s expected opposition to Sleiman as a pretext to allow March 14 to elect one of its preferred candidates by simple majority. As tough as Boillon talked about France,s readiness to punish Syria should it be shown to have blocked Sleiman,s election (which we doubt would be so plainly apparent), we do not see how the French risk-averse approach leads to any outcome other than one the Syrians bless.

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